

## **An interview with Loraine Gelsthorpe**

PHILLIPS, Jake <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7606-6423>>

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**An interview with  
Lorraine Gelsthorpe  
Chair of the Probation Institute**

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## Interviewed by Jake Phillips

**You have been the Chair of the Probation Institute for around 18 months now. This seems like a fitting role for you, considering the contribution you've made to the field of probation through your research and other activities but I'd like to start at the beginning: what got you into probation in the first place?**

I was always drawn to practice, and to people on the margins - being a child of the Vicarage - and even before University worked as a psychiatric nursing assistant - which was a sociological experience in itself! I worked in a large psychiatric hospital in Nottinghamshire on a psychogeriatric ward with women who had been incarcerated when they were 14 or 15 for having illegitimate children. It was the time of the de-institutionalisation movement and I had no idea where some of the women would live when they left the hospital: I just hoped for community care for them. Many were so institutionalised that it was hard to imagine how they would survive. In the second summer vacation of my time at Sussex University for my first degree I worked for Sean McConville (my tutor) as a research assistant on a major penal history project: this prompted my interest in criminal justice. This continued for a while after I finished my degree, at the same time as embarking on a career in social work, working initially with young people in trouble/troubled young people.

**And how did you then end up working in the university/doing research?**

After a personal bereavement (my partner) I left social work and came to Cambridge to study for the MPhil in Criminology. The course was wonderfully eye-opening. I had a job lined up in the Probation Service in Bristol for after the MPhil



**Loraine Gelsthorpe**  
Chair  
Probation Institute

(the new careers movement in Probation) but was persuaded to do a PhD instead. My thinking was that I would turn to Probation afterwards. It was not to be - my PhD was on girls and young women in the criminal justice system and allied agencies, and one thing led to another.

I subsequently worked for the Centre for Youth, Crime and Community at Lancaster University where Norman Tutt and colleagues were doing some innovative work with local authorities to divert young people from crime, the courts, and custody. Various projects followed including research on Crown Prosecution Service decision-making in regard to young people and the newly formed CPS operational philosophy would be when they made decisions about prosecuting young people.

A further post-doc looked at different regimes in men's prisons in the Midlands and I also did research analysing on race and gender issues in the production of Pre-Sentence Reports. This was the first piece of probation-focused research and it led to engagement with the Ministry of Justice. Working closely with Peter Raynor, we were asked to assist in devising a mechanism to ensure that race and gender issues were properly addressed in probation training and, crucially, in the production of pre-sentence reports. We duly created a checklist of points to consider when preparing reports - a checklist which remained in use for some considerable time.

I was subsequently Principal Investigator for research relating to Community Service Pathfinder Projects, research relating to community provision for women, an Integrated Offender Management project in Greater Manchester, and then led research relating to the function and meaning of the arts for people in prison and in the community. I have been involved in various other research projects relating to supporting people with learning disabilities caught up in the criminal justice system, housing provision for women leaving prison, self-inflicted deaths under community supervision, and trauma experienced by front-line workers in the criminal justice system for example.

**What do you think counts as good quality probation practice? How can probation do good for people on probation and the communities it serves?**

The notion of 'Doing Good' is very complex ... I think that the evidence suggests that the best form of public protection involves helping to change the hearts, minds and behaviour of those

who are in conflict with the law. But people have to want to change or be persuaded that change would be a good thing. We all know the saying 'you can lead a horse to water but you cannot make the horse drink' - and indeed, sometimes the key work of probation staff is persuading people that they can change as well as monitoring behaviour and protecting the public that way. I incline towards a social work model of practice (as in Scotland, with criminal justice social workers) and think that probation work is best organised locally, and in partnership with local authorities and other local third sector agencies. We know enough about effective supervision (see the review by Joanna Shapland for example: <https://www.cep-probation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/quality-of-probation-supervision.pdf>) to promote good practice. I also think that Approved Premises - often run by Probation - are under-rated and yet can provide a point of stability in people's lives. The best APs support people through difficult transitional periods; indeed, I think that there is scope for APs to be used much more as an alternative to imprisonment.

**What are the main challenges for probation at the moment?**

There are many challenges, not least a shortage of resources in the form of trained probation staff. Shabana Mahmood, as Justice Secretary, has indicated commitment to recruiting a thousand more trainee probation officers but it is going to take time for them to complete the training. Would that we could entice some experienced probation staff back into the Service! The BBC Panorama report on Probation showed the impact of underinvestment and lack of skilled and experienced staff on the effectiveness of the service in managing serious offenders.

The former Chief Inspector of Probation (Justin Russell) produced an annual report for 2022/23 which indicated a number of pressing issues waiting lists and delays to the assignment of offenders; serious high profile case reviews which have highlighted deficiencies in decision-making, and levels of staff; high caseloads and underfunding to meet demand; recruitment and retention issues combined with reduced experience in staff due to the retirement/ departure of experienced officers (some through the strain and stresses of the job). In addition, a centralised management structure linked to the Prison Service means that benefits of links with local organisations have been lost.

I think that one general challenge is that 'prison-centricity' features very largely in political thinking, media responses to crime, and to some extent in the public view too. It is as if there is no knowledge of core correctional curricula and of effective supervision practice. Perhaps the Probation Service needs a media champion/public relations person to 'sell' the good/effective work it does. I have been struck by the nature of the political pronouncements on recent riots/ disturbances - few of us would argue that custodial sentences weren't deserved by some of the offenders, but in some cases, where there was recognition and remorse in relation to the wrongfulness and harmfulness of actions, unpaid work in the community to give people opportunity to put things right (e.g. repairing damage done to hotels and hostels where asylum seekers are living) might have been a more suitable and educational option. This is not to underplay the nastiness of some of the offending behaviour but to think strategically about what is most likely to impact attitudes and behaviour for the better. Of course, this would require well-trained and experienced supervisors...

### **In that context, what advice you give to people thinking about entering the profession?**

I would certainly encourage people to think about a career in the Probation Service - a challenging and rewarding occupation in equal measure, but at the same time I think that the Probation Service needs to do more for its staff in order to retain them. The Service needs to provide space for reflective practice, recognising the need for ongoing training and support within the Service. Probation staff are not mentioned often enough in debates about public service occupations and appropriate financial rewards.

I would also encourage trainees to join the Probation Institute - for access to a supportive community of practitioners and CPD opportunities.

### **And what advice would you have for the people who are leading probation?**

I would encourage those leading Probation to think about other management structures and models of practice. In a way, probation staff have as much to do with police staff as they do prison officers and so a localised structure which facilitates closer links with the police, local authorities and allied agencies is critical. Youth Justice Teams/Services have core principles of practice but work within a multi-agency structure to facilitate sign-posting to ongoing support. Very often, offending is just one problem amongst many for people, and so to address the 'offending behaviour' without addressing other challenging factors in people's lives (homelessness, addiction, loss of hope and so on) won't take us very far. This doesn't mean providing 'goodies for baddies' as I have heard it put, but investment in accommodation and support services so as to lead to changes in behaviour in order to protect the public.

Community Centres for women have a strong record of success via their holistic approach to supporting women who have offended (see the summary provided by the Tavistock Institute: <https://www.tavinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Women-and-Girls-Briefing-Report-Final-web.pdf>). The good news stories of people changing their attitudes and behaviour because of the commitment and support of probation staff is too often overlooked.

I would also encourage those leading Probation to read, inwardly digest and act upon the House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee report *Cutting Crime: better community sentences* (published in December 2023) which sets out the case for change to restore confidence in community sentencing rather than the over reliance on sending people to prison. There is a mistaken belief in deterrence-based sentencing - as if the harsher the penalty the greater the deterrence. There is very little research evidence to support such thinking - though it is a popular political view. Governments should promote what is effective (based on research findings) rather than what seems politically expedient at the time - and if this means challenging popular public opinion - then governments should do this in the interests of ensuring real change in attitudes and behaviour, and public protection.

The long-term vision and focus of Probation needs to be on communities served by local government. The Service needs to be placed-based with the whole system and governance focused on applying a holistic approach to offender management that prevents reoffending and builds trust in criminal justice.

### **I know you don't have a crystal ball but what do you think the future holds for probation?**

I wish I did have a crystal ball...it is very hard to predict the future direction of probation, I just hope that there won't be further financial cuts and that the commitment to generate more trained officers will be followed through. Ideally, probation and community penalties would come to the fore; confidence would be restored in Probation (via experienced officers working in the courts so that magistrates receive information from trusted colleagues). Moves to professionalise probation staff are important; some see the embeddedness in the civil service as too constraining, but others see this as improving their status. What is key here is the need to recognise that probation work is an essential part of the criminal justice system which should not be constraining. Creativity and experienced probation voices should be heard in thinking about what works.

### **And, finally, what role does the Probation Institute have in all of this?**

The importance of the Probation Institute has grown in recent years. The PI serves to champion probation work (in all its forms), and to support probation staff and trainees through a number of CPD opportunities: research-based training seminars, regular monthly professional discussions, and research opportunities. The Probation Institute publishes discussion papers, 'think pieces', this magazine (*Probation Quarterly*), and is a key player in debates about future directions for criminal justice. In references to HMPPS (His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service) the emphasis is often on prisons - the Probation Institute speaks up for probation and will continue to do so.